

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Remarks Honoring the National and State Teachers of the Year**  
*April 24, 2023*

*The First Lady.* [Laughter] Thank you. Thank you. Please.

Thank you, Miguel, and thank you to all of our honored guests.

You know, it meant so much to me getting some time with all of you today. And I loved hearing about the moments that bring you joy and laughter and about your challenges as well. Because, hey, we've all been there, haven't we? This job isn't always easy, but it matters. And the Biden-Harris administration understands that.

I always knew that Joe would be a great education President. Because he's seen how hard you work and how much you help our students. And that's why he's done so much to support better pay and loan forgiveness.

*Audience member.* Thank you, Joe! [Laughter] Thank you!

*The First Lady.* It's why he put a public-school educator in charge of the Department of Education. [Applause] See? I promised.

So we're here to take a moment on one of the biggest stages in the world, the White House, to say that teachers change lives. And I think that message matters more than ever. Because lately, when I turn on the TV, I see pundits and politicians talking about our profession. I hear them attacking our public schools, distorting the truth about what we do, and saying that parents and teachers are at odds.

But that's not what I've seen. As I've traveled this country, I've visited some pretty amazing programs where parents and teachers are working hand in hand to help kids overcome challenges and make our schools better for everyone. There's no divide between those who love our students and those who teach them, because we all do both.

Parents know that we are our children's first teachers. And educators know that this isn't just a job that we walk away from at 3:15. [Laughter] When we're caring for our own kids, we're thinking about someone else's children too. We chose this path out of love for what we do and who we teach.

Parents and educators are partners. And we, together—we know what our students need. They need kindness and respect. They need grace and the chance to make mistakes. They need room to explore this world, to be curious and surprised and disappointed and triumphant. They need to know that they are valued and safe.

And parents can't always do that alone. Parents don't want to do that alone. Every day, they put a piece of their hearts on that school bus, send their kids to school, trusting, hoping that someone will listen when they can't; answer questions and ignite imaginations; and Band-Aid scrapes when, you know, they aren't there to do it themselves.

You fulfill that hope every single day. [Applause] Yes, thank you.

And with their parents' love and your guidance, with the faith and the fortitude of their community behind them, students grow into the people they dream of becoming. Together, you shape and shepherd their lives.

My grandmother was a teacher in a small town in New Jersey.

*Audience member.* Woo! [Laughter]

*The First Lady.* Over there—there she is, New Jersey. [Laughter]

And she loved her work, and her students loved her in return. And just like you might see in the movies, she used to call her students to class with a big brass bell. And when she died, she didn't leave behind a big, giant estate. But what I inherited from her, what I still have to this day, is that bell.

And I sometimes think about how her legacy resonated into the world like waves of sound, changing those who heard its ring.

And I think of every student who she taught, you know, and wonder what amazing things they grew up to do. Perhaps they are doctors or architects or scientists. And of course, there's at least one teacher. Today, all of you ring your own bell, pulling each person you teach into a harmony that never ends.

Right now someone out there is a better thinker because of you. Someone is standing a little taller because you helped her find the confidence that she needed. Someone is working a little harder because you pushed him to try. Someone is kinder because you showed her what that meant. And someone is braver because you helped him find his courage.

Never stop ringing that bell. Never forget that, student by student, the lives you change go on to change the world.

Thank you.

[At this point, audience members gave a standing ovation.]

Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

And now I'm proud to introduce someone who has answered her call with passion, persistence, and pride: the 2023 National Teacher of the Year, Rebecka Peterson.

*National Teacher of the Year Rebecka Kermanshahi Peterson.* Thank you, Dr. Biden. It's such a tremendous honor to be recognized by a First Lady who champions the profession as one of us. You exhibit for the Nation the dedication we all feel for this profession.

And thank you, Secretary Cardona, for keeping teachers at the center of your work.

Thank you to my family. Without your support, I couldn't be here today.

Well, today I stand in front of you with the name Rebecka Peterson, yet the name I was given at birth is Rebecka Mozdeh Kermanshahi, a beautiful intersection of my two family cultures: Rebecka from my mother's Swedish heritage, Kermanshahi and Mozdeh from my father's Iranian heritage. My parents and I immigrated to the United States when I was young. And at 20, I finally became a U.S. citizen. I may not have been born here, but I consider myself a daughter of this country.

I've been lucky to witness the beauty of our Nation from a, perhaps, different lens, a lens that pays special attention to those people who wrap their arms around those of us who may be a little bit different. Often, those people who held me, literally and figuratively, were my teachers. They channeled their influence for good. And I was always in awe of the power that they held.

"Bearer of good news," the meaning of my Iranian name, is the phrase I've spent my career leaning into. Just like my own teachers, my fellow state teachers of the year, and the millions of other teachers in this country, I want to bring the good news of joy and hope to my students, and to reciprocate that gift of education that my teachers gave me.

As educators, we stand with one foot firmly grounded in the reality of what is while the other stands in the promise of what can be. We are fueled by the equalizing power of public education to dismantle marginalization, eliminate systemic inequities, and end generational poverty.

I teach because of Reeya, Meghana, and Kushi to show that immigrant and first-generation women do have a place in STEM. I teach because of Danny, one of seven family members who lived in a one-bedroom apartment, but who will be attending an Ivy League college this fall in the hopes of making a better life for his and his family—him and his family.

And I teach because of Morgan and Alyssa—once my students, now my colleagues—who are impacting lives in their very own classrooms. I teach because it gives me life to offer the American Dream to the next generation. Teachers, you hold our democracy. You create spaces that insist we belong to each other.

May we continue to reach inward and outward. May we be an example of creativity and service, modeling the importance of curiosity in both the big and the small moments. May we learn how to belong to ourselves so we can belong to each other. May we walk this life together with open hearts and open hands, because *I slutändan, kanske vi alla bara går hem till varandra*. "In the end, maybe we're all—all of us—just walking each other home."

Thank you.

And now I'm pleased to introduce a President who honors the good news that teachers bring. He knows we can belong to each other and be different, we can belong to each other and disagree. This is a President who knows we can belong to each other the way our students have taught us we can.

It's now my honor to introduce the proud husband of an educator, President Biden.  
[Laughter]

*The President.* Thank you. Well, she's pretty good, isn't she? [Laughter] Holy mackerel.

Good afternoon, everybody.

*Audience members.* Good afternoon.

*The President.* I'm glad it's a lovely day. I'm Joe Biden, Jill Biden's husband. [Laughter]

Secretary Cardona, thank you for fighting so hard for our Nation's children and our teachers.

And thank you for the Members of Congress who are here today, including two outstanding educating Congresswomen: Johnna [Jahana; White House correction]—and by the way, Johnna [Jahana] Hayes is—Johnna [Jahana], where are you? There you are, Johnna [Jahana]. Right in front of me. Stand up, Johnna [Jahana]. Johnna [Jahana] happens to be a teacher—happens to be the 2016 National Teacher of the Year.

By the way, she's pretty good, isn't she? [Laughter] I think she could run. [Laughter]

Folks, you all know what a big deal that is. And Congressman Jamaal Bowman. Congressman, where are you? Jamaal, good to see you, pal. A teacher who went on to establish a middle school.

And most of all, I want to welcome our guests of honor, the 2023 Teachers of the Year. Again, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Well, I guess they're—[applause]. Folks, if you didn't know it before, we hope you know now: Teachers have several champions in the White House. [Laughter] Jill and I and Kamala and Doug.

Jill is the country's first First Lady to work full time—full time—teaching while doing her duties as First Lady, as a community college professor in Virginia. And I tell you what, she is a proud member of her union as well.

Jill reminds me all the time that teaching is not just what you do, it's who you are. It's who you are. So I want to stand by saying to every teacher here today and every teacher across the country: Thank you, thank you, thank you. And I mean it.

But as we've seen the past few years, a difficult profession has gotten even harder. And we ask so much of our Nation's teachers: early mornings greeting students, late nights grading papers.

By the way, if you ever see me getting off of Air Force One in another country with Jill carrying a big bag—[laughter]—she's correcting papers. [Laughter] Oh, you think I'm kidding? I'm not joking.

And so, folks, there's no math league [there's the math league; White House correction] or basketball team you coach after school. They call you to make parents—meet them during—you call parents during the lunch hour if they're child is having a little bit of difficulty. Your child you pull aside during the planning period because they need extra help.

And, folks, and teaching over Zoom during the pandemic. And by the way, a sidelight here: A lot of parents had to drive up to McDonald's to be able to get online. We're changing that. Everybody is going have access. Everybody.

But at any rate—to bringing extra snacks when your students, because they can't learn when they're hungry, and spending your own money—your own money—on school supplies. You're explaining the unexplainable, from banned books to duck-and-cover drills. How do you explain that to a child in the year 2023?

We ask so much of you. And each and every time, you all step up and say yes. And the impact you have on our students is profound. As Jill just mentioned, every single one of us here is at least in part here because of somewhere along the way we had a teacher who believed in us. And I bet you can name your teacher. I can name the one who believed in me. I can name her in grade school and in college. Helped me believe in ourselves: That's what you do.

That's the power of a great teacher. And the teachers represented here today, you're the best of the best of the best. Thank you. Congratulations to each and every one of you.

As they say in the United States Senate, in which I served a long time, if you'll please excuse a point of personal privilege, I want to give a special mention to Ashley Lockwood from the State of Delaware. Ashley, stand up.

*Delaware State Teacher of the Year Ashley Lockwood.* Thank you. Oh my gosh! [Laughter]

*The President.* And besides, our daughter's name is Ashley as well. [Laughter] So, Ash, thanks for what you do, kiddo. You make us proud.

*Ms. Lockwood.* Thank you.

*The President.* And of course, a huge congratulations to Rebecka Peterson from Oklahoma, our Teacher of the Year.

Rebecka moved to the United States as a little girl, the daughter of medical missionaries. She spoke Swedish at first, knew only two words in English, two words her parents were most—thought were the most important for her to learn: "Thank you." Thank you.

Soon, Rebecka's teachers here in America changed everything about her. All the teachers we had here, they changed—they gave her a chance—she's—I'm not even—I don't know what she

thought at the time. Instead of making her feel self-conscious that she didn't speak English, they told her she was "linguistically gifted" and taught her how to read. They saw how much she loved math and said she was a "superpower."

One day, a teacher told her, "I think you should be a teacher." And Rebecka says, "Those words were a song to my heart." A song to my heart. Well, you're still singing, kid. *[Laughter]* And so Rebecka put her superpower to work, and she became a calculus teacher.

Oh, God, do I remember calculus. *[Laughter]*

*[The President made the sign of the cross.]*

*[Laughter]* I went to a school—it was prep school. It was very heavy on mathematics. Anyway—*[laughter]*—that's why, when I got to college, I majored in history and political science. *[Laughter]* God bless the calculus teachers, and that is no joke. *[Laughter]*

And what's more, Rebecka's school district is full of students who were a lot like she was. The students in her district speak 62 different languages—62. Many feel like they don't quite belong. As you can imagine, Rebecka makes sure that they know that they do belong and they can achieve great things.

With Rebecka leading the way, the pass rate in her class went from 50 percent to 87 percent, nearly double the State average. More of her students became National Merit Finalists than the entire rest of the district combined. And, in the ultimate tribute, several of her former students are now math teachers themselves, as was referenced earlier.

Her students tell her even after they've graduated, they hold onto the lessons she taught them not only about integrals and derivatives, but about community connections, about how all of us belong. Rebecka put a teacher's creed into words when she said, "There's no such thing as someone else's child." No such thing as someone else's child.

Our Nation's children are all our children. As I often say, you teachers hold the kite strings that lift our national ambitions aloft. You really do. Imagine, imagine—just imagine if we didn't have great teachers in this country, what difficulty we'd be in. You are determining our future. And that's why my administration supports teachers and supports them across the board.

And folks, look—you know, last year, the 50th anniversary—and by the way, this shouldn't be a life-threatening profession. You know, the concerns about whether or not—I mean, did you ever think you'd be teaching kids how to duck and cover? Only this time—we used to do that back—a hundred years ago when I was in school because of concern about a nuclear war. But now it's about concern about guns—about guns—and what happens.

You know, commonsense gun safety laws that protect our kids and our teachers are badly needed. And we passed—*[applause]*. We passed a number of pieces of legislation, but there's more that we have to do.

You know, the idea—the legislation that we worked on and got passed was the—using the American Rescue Plan to provide historic funding for schools to reopen safely so teachers could get back to the classroom, doing what they do best.

Before the American Rescue Plan, only 46 percent of schools were open and in person. Today, that's now 100 percent. Plus, that law has delivered critical support for schools, including funding for after-school programs, summer programs; hiring more teachers, counselors, and school psychologists.

In fact, more than 80 percent of the schools' superintendents say they are using funds from the American Rescue Plan to help students recover academically, to address the mental health crisis facing so many of our young people as a consequence of the pandemic. And it's real.

And thanks to that law, the number of school social workers is up 48 percent. The number of school counselors is up 10 percent. The number of school nurses is up 42 percent. And since I took office, we've added nearly 80,000 additional public-school teachers—80,000. And this really matters.

We passed the most significant bipartisan, as I said, gun safety law in 30 years because teachers now find themselves on the frontlines, and gun violence is a real problem. We want to do more. I continue to call on Congress for commonsense gun safety laws to protect kids and our teachers. Teaching should not be a life-threatening profession, and educators should not need to be armed to feel safe in a classroom.

Folks, as I said, last year, the 50th anniversary of title IX, the groundbreaking civil rights—prohibiting sex discrimination in schools—passed. Our schools should be places where everyone is safe and safe to be themselves.

But across the country of late from our—some of our friends on the extreme right, LBG [LGBTQ; White House correction] students and teachers are under attack from hateful laws. I've directed Secretary Cardona to strengthen protections of title IX to protect both students and school employees from sexual assault, harassment, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

And we're also increasing funding for students who need our help the most, including those with disabilities. Last year, the funding was provided for millions of students through the Individuals with Disabilities Act—the Education Act, I should say. It was the largest increase in nearly two decades. In fact, since I became President, we've added \$1.3 billion to this funding.

And for the first time in 45 years, the Department of Education is updating critical regulations for how public schools can make sure that students with disabilities get the education that we promised them and they're entitled to. And that includes preventing harassment; ensuring equal access to school facilities, playgrounds; and rigorous classwork.

We've learned a lot about disabilities over the last 45 years. Our education policy should reflect what we've learned.

We know that there's no—there's no such—there's so much more to finish the job, and we can do it. For example, I think everyone here would agree, as I said in my State of the Union Address, let's give public school teachers a raise. A raise. I mean it. You can stand for that one. It's important. *[Laughter]*

And let's provide access to preschool for 3- and 4-years-old. In the last century, when we made 12 years of public education universal in America, we had the best educated, best prepared nation in the world. So now let's finish the job.

Studies show that children who go to preschool are nearly 50 percent more likely to finish high school and go on to earn 2- or 4-year degrees no matter the circumstances of which they come. It's just basic. It's in our overwhelming national interest. It's not only about their futures, it's about the Nation's future as well.

And let's be clear: Let's stand with teachers and parents against politicians who try to score political points by banning books. I never thought—as a student of history, I never thought I'd be a President who was fighting against elected officials trying to ban and—banning books.

Empty shelves don't help kids learn very much. And I've never met a parent who wants a politician dictating what their kid can learn and what they can think or who they can be.

And by the way, it's National Library Week. [Laughter] So a big thank you to librarians out there—[applause]—imparting the joy of reading, the power of knowledge to our Nation and our children. We have your back, I promise you.

I wish I could say that everyone saw it that way. But just last week, we saw the Speaker of the House and MAGA Republicans in Congress want to cut funding for schools by 22 percent, they've offered.

If that were to pass, it would mean cutting up to 60,000 teaching jobs, affecting 25 million children—it's a hard and fast—they're introducing it on—I believe tomorrow or Wednesday—affecting 25 million children. Cutting education is the last thing this country needs.

Let me close with this. As you get to school each day—often, many of you, before dawn—as you head home each night, weighed down with papers to grade, please know that we see you. We see you educating our students, your students. We also see you confronting them and comforting them when they're in trouble, caring for them and inspiring them.

Our children are our Nation's future; they are in your hands. And that's not hyperbole. And looking out at all of you, that's the one reason I can honestly say I've never been more optimistic about America's future than I am today. I mean it.

We just have to remember who we are. We're the United States of America. There is nothing beyond our capacity if we do it together. Nothing, nothing, nothing we've ever set our sights on we have failed in accomplishing.

So God bless you all, and God bless our Nation's teachers.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:11 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; and Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin O. McCarthy. The First Lady referred to Christine Girtain, science teacher, Toms River High School South and Toms River High School North in Toms River, NJ.

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